

# Oral Herstories: WOMEN POLITICAL LEADERS IN UGANDA

## The Personal Is Political





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# Acronyms

<b>AMWA</b>	Akina Mama wa Afrika
<b>ANT</b>	Alliance for National Transformation
<b>DP</b>	Democratic Party
<b>EGBV</b>	Electoral Gender-Based Violence
<b>FDC</b>	Forum for Democratic Change
<b>FIDA</b>	International Federation of Women Lawyers
<b>FORWODE</b>	Forum for Women in Democracy
<b>KCCA</b>	Kampala City Council Authority
<b>LC</b>	Local Council
<b>LRC</b>	Land Redevelopment Committee
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>NEC</b>	National Executive Council
<b>NRM</b>	National Resistance Movement
<b>NUP</b>	National Unity Platform
<b>PSEA</b>	Protection Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
<b>RC</b>	Resistance Council
<b>RACI</b>	Regional Association for Community Initiative
<b>SH</b>	Sexual Harassment
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UWONET</b>	Uganda Women's Network
<b>VAWIP</b>	Violence Against Women in Politics



WOMEN CAN



## A) Introduction

**The Women in Political Leadership in Uganda Oral Herstory is a collection of the leadership trajectories of 16 women politicians in their diversities. The interviews were weaved together to document the lived experiences of women politicians. The aim of documenting the Oral Herstory is to inspire and expose future leaders to the lived experiences of those that have walked a similar pathway. While themes such as background, role models, challenges faced emerge as cross-cutting, each individual presents a unique story of how they navigated spaces to become the leaders they are today and contributed to the advancement of women's rights, good governance, and overall development of Uganda.**

Akina Mama wa Afrika is running a project, 'Strengthening Women's Leadership and Influence in Political Processes in Uganda' which dovetails with AMWA's Vision and Mission which aims to build a cohort of value-based leaders who will influence the prioritization of women's issues even through political participation. The intervention also directly contributes to our partner's areas of intervention (1.2, 1.3, and 1.4) which seek to diversify political engagement, improve representation and recognition of women as electoral candidates and in leading political positions; and improve participatory decision making.

## B) Background

### Characteristics of the Respondents

The following detailed breakdown provides a snapshot of the characteristics of the respondents. The respondents' number of years in politics ranged from between 20 years and 1 year, serving from national to sub-national levels, current legislators and former Members of Parliament, representatives of women's leagues and from the Democratic Party, Alliance for National Transformation, Forum Democracy, National Unity Platform, and National Resistance Movement. Regarding the age of the respondents' half of the interviewees, eight (8), are between 30-44; four women are over 60 years of age; three are in the category of 45-60 years and, one is in the category of 18-29 years. The age variation provided an intergenerational perspective to the Oral Herstory.

In terms of education, two hold PhDs; seven hold Master's degrees; five Bachelor's degrees; one a diploma and one an advanced certificate (Senior 6). Furthermore, in terms of marital status, nine of the women are married; four are single; one is divorced; one is separated, and one is widowed. This presents leadership journeys from the different possible family setups, showing the ways in which, each could influence things such as power negotiations, social support, balancing different responsibilities, and how each impacts the women's leadership trajectory and participation.






The participants represent five political parties in Uganda. Four belong to the ruling party National Resistance Movement (NRM); three are from National Unity Platform (NUP), currently the main opposition party; four are from Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), the previous main opposition party; three from Alliance for National Transformation (ANT), a new party founded in 2019; and two are from the Democratic Party (DP), the oldest party in Uganda. Eight of the women have been in their parties for 1-10 years; four between 11-20 years; three less than one year, and, one for over 20 years. The women who have been in the party for less than a year are in fact members of new parties such as NUP and ANT but most of them were previously members of other political parties. These varied experiences enrich their journeys and political perspectives.

The participants hold a range of positions in their parties including women's league chairpersons, district councillors, women members of parliament, deputy president, and National (NEC) members. This reflects the diverse possibilities of positions that women can vie for in running for political leadership.

Overall, the women's backgrounds reflect diversity in age, education, party affiliation as well as position in the parties. This presents a diverse array of women leaders for the younger women to emulate.



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## C) The Powerful Lived Experiences that shaped their leadership trajectories

### Childhood Experiences

It emerged that childhood experiences, family dynamics, and social encounters often provided the very first quivers of interest in public leadership. More specifically experiences with deep-seated discrimination, injustice, sexism played greatly into spurring the leaders into political leadership.

For example, Dr. Miria Matembe's childhood experience of discrimination at an early age stirred in her a desire to tackle patriarchy and advance women's rights. In her experience, her father demonstrated that he valued the boy child over the girl child exemplified by how her education was deprioritized over her male siblings, which made her realize that girls were treated as subordinate to boys.


**“My brother’s school fees were always availed before mine. I also stayed back and took care of home at least twice a week when my mother went to lead the Mother’s Union,” she recounts. “He remained in school all the time, but I was expected to perform as well as he did.”** observed *Dr. Miria Matembe*

Dr. Matembe further narrates that as she grew up she observed widespread oppression of her mother, aunties, and other women and girls in her community. Her mother did not contribute to decision-making in the home, and her aunt was rendered useless for fleeing from an abusive husband.

**“My aunt’s only defence was that she had brought bride price to the home and produced four sons for her husband. Even at that tender age, I questioned why the value of this aunt was in bringing bride price and producing boys,”** narrates *Dr. Matembe*. **“My childhood dream, which is also God’s purpose for my life, then became clear as light; to fight for gender equality and women’s rights,”** says *Dr Matembe*.







On her part, Dr. Lina Zedriga shared that her inspiration to join active political leadership was the desire to amplify the muted voices. Close to her heart is the plight of women in refugee camps. When she worked in an Internally Displaced persons' camp from 2011-2012 she witnessed women drain their menstrual blood in the sand for failure to afford sanitary towels. Later she worked as an associate director at the Centre of Peace and Conflict Studies.

**“I began to campaign and advocate for sanitary pads and reproductive health services especially for the women in these camps,” shares Dr Zedriga. It is the aforementioned events and the founding of an organization the Regional Association for Community Initiative that spurred her into politics.**

Ms. Agnes Nasirumbi as a person living with disabilities says she was inspired to join politics to ensure that she amplifies the voice of her community. Having faced a number of challenges as a person living with a disability, she felt the need to ensure that she joins politics to help others.

**“I realized that politics is one avenue to advance the rights of the less privileged like myself,” Said Agnes Nasirumbi**

Equally, Ms. Wanyenze, her ambitions to run for office were spurred by the need to represent the needs of minoritized groups such as sexual minority groups, specifically the women within those groups. In the meantime, she has founded the organization Queer Women Leaders Uganda to build critical leadership skills.


## Support Structures

One factor that contributes significantly to shaping women's political journeys and leadership roles is their family support structure. For most women leaders, the family is where they draw the first dose of inspiration and the bravery to step up, or not. Family, both extended and close, does not only provide the shot of self-confidence that propels them onto a political path but also guides what their cause and political agenda turns out to be. The household is where some women first encounter the ills that necessitate leadership transformation, and for some others, the encouragement and support to join politics and stay the course. This support comes in different forms including exposure to politics, provision, motivation, or even the required education.

For instance, when she decided as a child that she would become a 'pleader for women and girls', Dr. Matembe learnt that she would have to study law to actualize this dream. Although she had to find her own way to secure her law education, she acknowledges her father's part in setting her on this path.

**“I commend my father for taking the girls to school in a context where most girls in my village did not get an education and mothers had no say in decision making.”**

Hon. Kiiza's family dynamic on the other hand influenced the causes she would take on and the caliber of political leader she would become. Born in a multiparty political family, Hon. Kiiza appreciated political tolerance from a young age, which has defined her political struggles to date.



**“My mother was affiliated to the Uganda People’s Congress, and my father to the Democratic Party,” she says.**

For Hon. Waligo, support came in form of encouragement to step up to the challenge. “It was my father that always gave me the courage to lead. I loved him. I emulated his values. He had many good friends in NRM though he never allowed them to influence him,” she shares, adding,

**“This alone greatly influenced the way I relate with other political parties.”**

Likewise, Hon. Ogwal and her siblings have followed in their father’s footsteps, as she explains;

**“My leadership journey began with the cause of orphans, which was shaped by my father’s own life story. He was an orphan raised by a foreign missionary. When his parents died, he sacrificed his studies to come home and take care of his siblings and see them through school. My siblings have also taken up looking after vulnerable children. The children we raise become part of the family. I have raised over 10 orphans in my own home.”**

On her part, Hon. Kabanda’s father made deliberate efforts to expose her to women’s capacity to lead. He took her along for political functions, especially where women featured prominently. She narrates, “My father used to move around with me so that I could have people to look up to. When he donated a book to me, he autographed it saying it was his wish for me to become like Mahatma Ghandi. I wish he was here to see what I have become today. Daddy was everything to me.”

In some cases, it has been the mothers who never had the voice or the support to stand up that spurred on their daughters to take up the mantle. Ms. Annet Nakyanja testifies,

**“My father was always putting me down but my mother encouraged and believed in my ability to lead.” She also had her uncles for role models and the exposure she needed since they were leaders in different capacities.**







## Spousal support

In some instances, spousal moral, financial, emotional, and social support become a great anchor onto which women build and sustain their political trajectories.

**“It is important to have the support of a spouse,” recounts Hon. Jamwa. “My dear Amos supported me morally and financially. A highly respected man, he campaigned for me among the opinion leaders in the village. He is now deceased, but I reminisce about the magnitude of his support,”**

*Hon. Jamwa.*

Hon Jamwa adds that she specifically appreciates her late husband’s support because it came in the 1990s when societal beliefs that no marriage could survive with a woman in politics were dominant. “It was rumoured that all women in politics became ‘Museveni’s wives,’” she narrates. Her husband ignored those narratives and supported her. This too was further affirmed by Hon. Kiiza, Hon. Bako, , Hon. Waligo, Hon. Kabanda and Ms.Wanyeze among others, whose spouses’ support has been in form of advice, provision or support with domestic responsibilities to allow them time to focus on their political careers.

“My spouse helps out with the children on the days when I have to campaign or meet the electorate. This kind of support made my campaigns more manageable,” shares Ms. Wanyeze. Hon. Kabanda on the other hand says she always consults her husband on political matters, for example, before she goes on a radio talk show. For Hon. Waligo it is the liberty her husband has given her to engage in politics that she celebrates saying, “He has given me the time to do politics. Today, he is not in the country, but he checks on me daily.”

It is even easier for Hon. Kiiza whose husband is also a politician; “I think God was on my side. I married a man who was in politics and he has been a pillar in my journey. When I was contesting as a Councillor, he was also contesting for the Chairman position. When I was contesting as woman MP, he was contesting as a constituency MP.”

Evidently, a supportive spouse makes it easier for women to take up political leadership. Unfortunately, this support is not always guaranteed, even where the spouse is a fellow politician, and some women have been impacted by this phenomenon.

**“My husband is supportive and one of the key persons that managed my campaigns. He provides for my political needs such as money for fuel and does a lot of research on how I can improve my political career. I am thankful to God for a man like him because this is not how I started my political journey,” offers Hon. Bako. “My former husband, a politician at the time, found another woman and kicked me out of the house when our firstborn was two months old.”**

Ultimately, family support bears some influence on what trajectory a woman’s political career will take.

## Role models and past leadership roles

Like family and spousal support, role models validate women's political leadership dreams and aspirations. The interviewees for the Oral Herstories shared about people they have looked up to in their leadership journeys for guidance and inspiration, both men and women, local and international, and how they have influenced them.

Dr. Zedriga, a former teacher and judicial officer, offers a list of Ugandan women whose leadership has shaped her own political journey and activist she has become today: "I was inspired by my participation in two events—the process of the 1995 constitution and the Juba Peace Process (2011-2015). As a judicial officer at the time, I interacted with powerful women such as Hon. Winnie Byanyima who was influencing and mobilizing all the women to participate in the making of the 1995 Uganda Constitution," explains Dr Zedriga. She adds that other women leaders such as Cecilia Ogwal inspired her to work in solidarity across parties; "We learned from Ogwal to rally behind women's issues regardless of political affiliation." She was also inspired by Hon. Betty Bigombe, who spearheaded the Juba Peace Process negotiating for peace between the NRM government and Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army.

For Hon. Adeke, it is Retired Colonel Dr. Kiiza Besigye who she says has taught her to remain consistent;


**“He has been noble and true. I have come to admire him because there is always something to learn from him.” Hon. Adeke also admires Winnie Byanyima for being a pioneer in the women’s movement and leaving a mark, as well as Dr. Matembe and Hon. Rebecca Kadaga for their ability to fight within the system. Internationally, her star leader is President Ellen Johson Sirleaf of Liberia.**

Hon. Waligo says her role models, include Nalubega Mariam, Perry Aritua, and Hon. Winnie Kiiza, who has encouraged her to contribute in any way she could.

A role model to others, Hon. Kiiza mentions five women she has looked up to - Winnie Mandela, Winnie Byanyima, Cecilia Ogwal, and Miria Matembe. "These women have carried me along. Each time they stood up to speak, I would watch and pray that one day I would lead like them." With so many women in leadership today, aspiring political leaders don't have to look too far out for inspiration, which was not always the case.







Ms. Bako, a young district councillor, did not come from a family of politicians. She was in fact raised by a single mother as her late father was polygamous, had 37 children. Ms. Bako is the second last born and the only educated one. To afford her daughter's education, her illiterate mother brewed local waragi. Ms. Bako only aspired for greater things because there were Ugandan women leaders that showed her it was possible - Dr. Lina Zedriga, Hon. Cecilia Ogwal and Dr. Maria Matembe.

**“I get satisfied when they stand and speak on behalf of women. You can really feel it, ‘yes, this one I really wish to be like.’**

At the start of her own political career, Dr. Matembe says she had to look farther out for inspiration. Evangelist Joyce Meyer provided spiritual guidance, which Dr. Matembe says has informed her leadership trajectory. Nonetheless, the majority of role models mentioned are fellow Ugandans in leadership, mostly fellow women, who embodied the missions and visions of their successors.

## Leadership Background

Interestingly, the majority of the women interviewed have served in leadership capacities within their communities before. Hon. Adeke, for example, was a prefect throughout school and the Guild President at Makerere University (2013-2014). Ms. Wanyenze was Guild Governor at Makerere University; Hon. Waligo was a head girl in primary school and a prefect in secondary school; and Hon. Kiiza was a head girl in high school. Hon. Nakyanja was a head girl in secondary school and the Secretary for Women's Affairs in Mary Stuart Hall at Makerere University.

Hon. Bako started her leadership journey in sports as a netball captain in primary school and later as the entertainment prefect in secondary school, and later speaker for the guild council and chairperson of the electoral commission for Islamic University Uganda. Hon. Nangozi was a sports prefect in school and the captain of the football team. She continues to serve as a leader in her church community of Arua diocese, where she is a member of the diocesan laity and is responsible for handling youth issues.


There is a clear progression in the women's leadership trajectories from lower to higher levels of leadership, from amateur to professional politics. The initial roles introduced these women to leadership, shaped their future political participation, and gave them a head start in the world of leadership.

When the National Resistance Movement opened spaces for women in 1996, Dr. Matembe was already well-positioned to take leadership:

**“I started my political life as an RC II. I was later the Vice-Chairperson of the Nakawa Division and later Secretary for Mass Mobilisation and Education in Kampala District. I joined Parliament of Uganda in 1999 as Woman Member of Parliament for Mbarara District, later became Cabinet Minister.”**

Hon. Kiiza was the Chairperson for the Women's Council at the school level and eventually grew through the ranks to become district women's leader of the student's council. Well-positioned through her role as district women's leader, Hon. Kiiza became one of the first councillors when the Local Government act was established, "I became a district councillor for my sub-county." She later contested to become woman MP for Kasese District on the FDC ticket and became the only woman MP from the entire western region on the opposition ticket from 2006 until 2007.

Likewise, Hon. Nakyanja, on leaving the university, joined the youth structures and began with the Local Council II where she was the Vice Chairperson of the youth council before joining the District Council.



Currently, Hon. Nakyanja is the district councillor in Wakiso, where she represents three local governments. Hon. Jamwa started off as an RC for women affairs in her village and progressed to Woman MP for Bukedi. Hon. Jamwa had been the Chairperson of Mothers Union and the Chairperson for the Lions Club—for which she was voted the best chairperson in 411 Districts comprising five countries, including Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Seychelles, and Ethiopia.

Ms. Nasirumbi also serves on local councils within her village as a representative of persons with disabilities.

Overall, the women’s leadership trajectories started from school before growing through the ranks to higher positions within the political space. Most of them also serve as leaders within their communities.

## Systemic Barriers

This section discusses the deterrents to women’s political leadership and influence. Those mentioned include the burden of balancing family and politics; the geographical boundary of women MPs; little financial muscle; the female-marriage gendered script; media representation of women; socio-cultural gendered stereotypes and electoral-based gender violence. The women experienced, to varying degrees, constraints to political leadership by virtue of their sex, depending on class, social-economic status, disability, marital status, physical appearance, and sexual orientation.

### Balancing Family and Constituency Business

The delicate balance of family and politics has proven to be overly burdensome for women in leadership, yet communities do not seem to appreciate the gender equality issues affecting leadership, according to Hon. Waligo. “We have to juggle families, national politics, and the constituency issues. The emotional strain of lengthy periods from the family has been the most debilitating for me.” At the time of the interview, Hon. Waligo had a nine-month-old baby she had not seen for three months.

Hon. Kiiza adds her voice saying that indeed, women are overworked, given the domestic demands in their other capacities as mothers and wives.

**“Because of this, many women don’t perform the way they are supposed to. We are needed in the office at most critical times yet also needed at home as wives, nurses, and caretakers. I find this very challenging.”**

Also problematic is the scheduling of meetings in ways that support male engagement, while overlooking women’s schedules. The women share that most meetings are scheduled after 5 pm or over the weekends when men are free, and women are attending to their domestic duties. Unless there is a woman at the top to influence this scheduling accordingly, women politicians end up either missing many important meetings or renegeing their home duties.







## Women MPs Manage Larger Constituencies

The geographical spread of constituencies for women MPs was cited as a structural impediment to their participation and influence. Hon. Kiiza explains that although affirmative action, which established a parliamentary seat for women in every district set out to increase women's representation, it was unfairly enacted. **"You can't give women with one hand and take away with another their ability to succeed."**

The larger constituency increases the financial implications on women in political leadership. Hon. Adong explains, "While a man moves around a few constituencies, a woman has many more, yet we are paid the same amount. You work double which is very tiresome and financially draining. No wonder women MPs are financially impoverished."

This financial burden is felt right from the campaign trail where women have a greater geographical expanse to cover. Hon. Waligo shares, **"My district has nine sub-counties that I have to reach in 60 days yet a man moves in only three sub-counties within the same period, and the electorate will expect to see both of you in equal measure."**

The constituency burden is, of course, even worse for women living with disabilities. Ms. Nasirumbi confirms that living with a disability makes it more difficult for her to traverse great distances.

The women advocate for an equitable division of constituencies between men and women. Hon. Kiiza proposes that every constituency should have both a male and female member of parliament. Eliminate what is unofficially regarded as 'men's seats' so that women and men can vie for them alike.


Hon. Adong on the other hand, suggests that affirmative action should be scrapped, and replaced with adult suffrage in which women MPs are elected by women alone. **"This way, the elected women can concentrate on women alone."** The impact, Hon. Adong suggests, would be greater because these representatives would focus on the women's agenda. Otherwise, affirmative action as it stands to benefit those women who can fund a campaign within large constituencies.

The overall implication of this arrangement is that women carry a bigger constituency burden, which has administrative and financial implications. The women, as such, advocate for a re-visiting of this policy to ensure equitable distribution of constituencies with men.

## Financial Constraints

Finances were mentioned as the biggest challenge women face in securing and retaining positions of leadership, especially in the environment where politics are highly commercialised. The women all agree that political participation is an expensive venture. **"If you don't have money, you can't make it in politics,"** asserts Hon. Kizza.

Dr Zedriga draws attention to an example where money is needed – nomination fees, which she says are far too much. "Three million is too much. In the 2015 elections, FIDA and women organizations such as FOWODE paid my fees," says Dr. Zedriga. Such prohibitive costs become a deterrent for women, who according to Hon. Waligo are already unfairly positioned. "There is a financial disparity between female and male counterparts within the political space. Women have little financial muscle," she says.



The issues of financial constraints raise a number of issues for women in leadership, including the exploitation of desperate women by their male opponents. “It leaves room for manipulation such as sexual harassment,” she says. Women become prey to sexual harassment as they move from one office to another looking for money. The women who reject these sexual advances are labelled derogatively as being ‘Malaya’, ‘Muyaye’ or having ‘lugezi-gezi’, literally translated ‘whore’, ‘thug’ or ‘wiseacre’.


Corruption also becomes prevalent because of financial constraints. **“Today you have a supporter, tomorrow they are nowhere to be seen because of bribery - an entire team can be corrupted,”** says Ms. Nyanjura. Dr. Matembe also shares her experience in the 2021 elections, when she stood for the position of Member of Parliament for the elderly. She says that she received calls from the voters from the Electoral College explaining that the other candidate had provided transport and food, money and booked them into hotels. **“What hurt me was not that I was not elected but rather the level of moral erosion, ethical and value degeneration from the elders. I did not expect elderly people to be bought. I was even angrier with the people who paid them,”** she says.

The situation gets worse for aspiring politicians in rural areas, as Ms. Wanyenze highlights; **“Most of them can’t even afford transport to reach the electorate. You push for her, register her and make posters for her then she asks you how she is supposed to make it to the villages without transport. So, you have to also provide about 200,000/= to facilitate a boda boda to take her around.”**

There are women who have given up leadership because of the financial dynamics of political leadership. **“Politics has become too commercial. I would not dare return to serve because voters are only interested in money rather than ideas. They sell themselves to the highest bidder,”** confirms Hon. Jamwa. Hon. Bako adds her voice to Jamwa’s, reiterating that there is no manifesto good enough to earn you a political position if you do not have money. In testimony to this, Hon. Kabanda confirms that thrice, she lost an election because she did not have the necessary resources. “In one of the elections I lost, my competitor was funded by one of the tycoons in Uganda,” she narrates. **“The man came to one of the rallies with a car full of money and started dishing it out. The electorate knew I was a good candidate, but we came to the rally using private funds that could never be enough.”**







A commercialized political space not only hinders the participation of women but locks out good candidates. What Ms. Wanyenze recommends is that a special fund is set up to support women with the commitment to lead who are financially unable.

## Cultural gender stereotypes

There are gender stereotypes that make it more difficult for women to join and succeed in leadership. Most common are the perceptions about unmarried women. Hon. Nyanjira testifies that she has been discriminated against because of being young and unmarried. This has been used by opponents to discredit her arguing that she was incapable of handling responsibilities on account of her being single. When Ms. Acago stood for the Serere Woman MP seat in 2016, she was constantly asked why she was not married. **“When you are unmarried, everyone thinks you are irresponsible, sleeping around, or do not want commitment. They don’t see why they should trust you with a constituency. This came up every time and it brought so many insults.”** Single female politicians are also silently perceived as husband snatchers, according to Hon. Jamwa.

Ms. Bako reveals that while she would have preferred to keep her family private, she had to reveal who her spouse was to retain her dignity on the campaign trail. “It got to a point where young boys were telling me they wanted to be my husband because they saw me alone.”



While this is a problem so severe for women that widows are still asked to present their spouses, it does not seem like men suffer this same fate. Hon. Kabanda testifies to this; **“A female contestant standing against seven men was incessantly asked to present her husband even though everyone knew he had died. The seven men she stood against were never asked for their spouses.”** The woman’s PhD qualifications and lengthy political experience, according to Hon. Kabanda, did not seem to matter; it was ‘her spouse’ that dominated her campaign dialogue with the electorate.

Hon. Alaso also shares that when she first campaigned for office as a single woman, she addressed the question regarding her single status so many times that at some point she said to one man, **“If you have cows, please take them to my parents and ask for my hand in marriage.”** The Hon. also remembers that a colleague of hers was ostracized for not having a biological child, always being asked why she did not have a child.

In another twist, still informed by gender stereotypes held among the electorate, Hon. Jamwa was tasked to return to her own birthplace rather than serve in her husband’s constituency. In patriarchal societies, a woman assumes her husband’s identity in marriage. In this case, however, the Hon. was rejected by her husband’s people. **“They asked me whether they married me to come and rule them? ‘You go back and stand in your constituency, they said.’”**

Such societal backlash will lend itself to a woman’s life details extending to her life before marriage, whether she is a divorcee, and how many partners she has had, discourages participation. It holds back women who would rather retain their dignity and privacy. Hon. Adeke explains that a colleagues’ entire campaign was ruined because the ex-husband went around telling people that they should not vote for her because she had left him.

Another irrelevant and uncomfortable area of focus women usually have to contend with is the focus on their physical appearance. “They want to vote for the most beautiful person so sometimes women are forced to compromise their morality to attract voters,” says Hon. Adeke. During youth elections especially,



Hon. Adeke says, some of the electorate take advantage of the young woman's desperation, providing resources to them in exchange for sexual favours.

The bigger stereotype at play is the sexualisation of women, which takes attention away from any other value that a woman might have outside her marriage or a relationship. Also, such societal beliefs mean that women have to be willing to contend with more than just development issues when they join political leadership.

## Media Representation of Women

Male dominance on media platforms is a problem women have to contend with, worsened by other issues such as the late night scheduling of programs. Hon. Nakyanja explains, "The media generally prioritizes men. They contact men first and only call women as a last resort if men are not available."

Most programs are scheduled late in the evening, this, according to Ms. Namyanzi, eliminates women from equal participation. The women argue that it is only women who can afford to travel safely at night that can engage in such programs. "If I am a poor woman in the village who can articulate issues but don't have the means to safely travel to the radio station and back after 8pm, I lose out," submits Ms. Namyanzi. Additionally, media appearances come at a steep cost. Given the less privileged financial situation of women, the high cost of media coverage works to further eliminate women from meaningful participation.

Another significant challenge to women's participation orchestrated by media is sexualisation of their bodies and objectification of female political leaders. Referencing her experience, Hon. Kiiza explains one of the ways this abuse, which is not meted out to the men, happens: **"When we came to the 8th Parliament, the media called us 'beauty queens'. They started describing us part by part - the eyes, the thighs, which is meant to devalue women."**

Hon. Jamwa recalls when some newspapers gave women nicknames relating to their physical appearance, completely disregarding any contribution they might have made in their work. "Even when a woman made a strong point in plenary, it was their appearance that was reported on. Some were called *Mothers' Union* to mean their outfits were not trendy."

Hon. Alaso also brings up a time when her age dominated the discussion in the media, which was not the case for her much older male opponent. **"Even when a woman scores 70% and above in their parliamentary participation, it is unlikely to be dwelt on. The focus is always on women's families and relationships, usually flagged up to discredit them,"** says Hon. Alaso.

Clearly, the media has failed to facilitate meaningful equitable participation for political leaders and instead serves to widen the gap between male and female contributions in politics. Media also only serves to validate cultural myths and stereotypes, hence devaluing instead of building up the woman in leadership positions. These shortcomings make it harder for women to engage freely and focus on real issues of leadership and will require deliberate efforts by the media to ensure fair, objective, and equitable coverage of all politicians, male or female.





## Limited support from fellow women

Women too have to unlearn patriarchal norms, which in politics present as sometimes women not supporting fellow women. Hon. Bako noted that **“Some women will not rally behind a fellow woman.’ ‘Aah for us we don’t want to be led by a woman, they argue’. Hon. Jamwa argues that this norm is part of the patriarchal socialization of women to perceive men, and not women, as leaders. She explains; “Most of the time, women see men and not women in positions of leadership in the community, in the church, and in politics,”** subconsciously, men become the natural choice for leadership positions. The women, on the other hand, are perceived more as caretakers and homemakers rather than leaders. Hon. Jamwa, adds **“Women are used by men to de-campaign fellow women by reminding them to return to taking care of their homes and children.”** This is significantly disruptive because these stereotypes are deep-rooted in the communities where women seek to serve.


Ms. Nasirumbi offers that to begin to offset this, women need to begin to rally behind each other, with a common women’s agenda that should supersede party politics. “If you ask me, a true woman leader should be non-partisan. There should instead be a women’s agenda, which all women can rally behind,” she offers.

## Electoral Gender-Based Violence

Electoral Gender-Based Violence (EGBV), sometimes referred to as Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWIP), is mainly reflected through sexual harassment, intimidation, and state violence. The women interviewed confirmed that indeed sexual harassment is prevalent but does not get due attention since, by its nature, survivors choose to remain silent. Ms. Acago explains that because most of the jobs within politics are based on appointment rather than merit, women find themselves in compromising situations. The burden of sexual propriety is not placed on men whose sexual fidelity is not used to judge their fitness for political office. Hon. Waligo testifies that in her work with women, many have withdrawn from participation because of the threat to their sexual propriety. “These men, one after the other, would tell their friends what they have done with the woman until she decides to withdraw from the political arena.”

The women agree electoral violence is rampant but was even worse during the scientific elections of 2021. Hon. Adong shares; **“The militaristic tide means that if you are not a State preferred candidate, you risk the highest level of abuse by the State apparatus. She narrates that in her own experience, one General stated arrogantly that no matter how many votes she would garner, she would not be declared the winner. Some women have been spectators at scenes so gruesome it changed their political journey. “I witnessed a young man from the opposition being killed during a police raid to disperse an opposition rally in Bugiri. I got so angry I denounced NRM there and then, and never turned back,”** reports Hon. Kabanda.

The arbitrary arrests and detentions of opposition supporters have discouraged women from joining and staying in politics. Dr. Zedriga explains that not only was she arrested by army men; she was also incarcerated in an all-male cell. With mobilization of women groups such as FIDA and international bodies such as the UN and a legal team that included seasoned lawyers like Nicholas Opiyo, Dr. Zedriga and her team were released on bail.



Dr. Zedriga also shares about instances where spouses were paid off to harass her female colleagues within the opposition and throw them out of their homes unless they denounced the opposition. She recalls a colleague whose father was denied medical treatment in a medical facility in Northern Uganda until he eventually passed away to force her to denounce the opposition.

The effects of VAWIP disproportionately affect women more than men because even when they are not direct victims, they are secondary victims to husbands, sons or daughters who have been violated. Mr. Frank Rusa believes that electoral violence hurts women more. “I fear that our voter turn up for the coming elections may be low because of fear of violence - women do not like violence.”

Indeed, long before Dr. Zedriga was politically active, her husband was a campaign manager for the main opposition leader Dr. Kiiza Besigye and has been a missing person since 2001. Dr. Zedriga, a practicing lawyer at the time, was arrested on suspicion of hiding her husband. **“My house was raided in Gayaza and my things carried away. I was arrested by the military, taken to Kireka and later arraigned in court with a group I was accused of conspiring with to facilitate my husband’s disappearance.”** Her children have been threatened and her source of income, an NGO, blacklisted.

Hon. Nangonzi also names voter intimidation, asserting that her agents were either bribed or whisked away and put in police custody during the 2021 elections. Efforts to get them freed were futile leaving her agents frustrated and swearing never to participate in the voting exercise again.


Ms. Mugisha testifies to the fear this causes among the electorate, who the women aspirants depend on to vote them into office. **“One of my agents was whisked away at about 2 a.m in a “drone”** (mini-buses with tinted windows used by security agents to make arrests). “People no longer live in their homes. The level of violence was out of this world, the killings extreme. Ugandans lives no longer matter,” she concludes.

Intimidation is another form of violence alluded to by the women. When she objected to the idea of changing the Ugandan Constitution to remove the age limit, Hon. Bako was given the option to retract her position or leave the NRM party. **“I decided to exit the party because I didn’t want the constitution tampered with.”**



**The challenges highlighted offer the women’s movement and development actors areas for advocacy and policy engagement in order to advance women’s political rights.**





Ms. Mugisha says she has received death threats for supporting the NUP opposition party. **“I now take extra caution, especially since one of my supporters got knocked down by a car we suspect belongs to security operatives. The man is now hospitalized and in critical condition,”** she claims.

Ms. Wanyeze, a leader in the queer community, says she lives in constant fear of being exposed as a queer person. **“I am an advocate for the rights of sexual minorities. If something like that popped up during my campaign, it would cause a lot of chaos and my children and family would be affected.”** Gender-based electoral violence threatens women’s wellbeing, hence inhibiting political participation.

## E) Conclusion

The documentation of the OralHerstories of Women in Political Leadership offers inspiration, rich examples and lessons learned for emerging women leaders to draw from for their own growth, career advancement and areas for future engagement. The challenges highlighted offer the women’s movement and development actors areas for advocacy and policy engagement in order to advance women’s political rights. The leadership trajectories demonstrate that there is no linear path to advancing politically but some crosscutting themes emerge on the areas that enable and dis-able women’s ability to advance politically. While the sample of 16 women may be considered limited to offer a global picture of the current landscape, their stories represent the diversity of issues women political leaders face. Future research endeavours can follow through on some of the areas highlighted to deepen the work.



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